

# Hi-tech crime

Computer criminals are becoming increasingly sophisticated in the way they target businesses costing them millions of pounds. Phil Chamberlain speaks to the newly-appointed head of the National Hi-Tech Crime Unit to see how they plan to combat cyber crimes.

Words like 'zombies' and 'bots' may be gobbledegook to most of us but can have a profound effect on business in the capital – they are the computers used by hackers to flood networks with junk mail.

This is just one example of the kind of crimes being dealt with by The National Hi-Tech Crime Unit (NHTCU), formed in April 2001, with the job of targeting serious and organised computer crime.

And if you are going to choose a base for a unit dedicated to tackling computer criminals – then right at the top of a futuristic blue-glass skyscraper in London's docklands is just the spot.

The new head of the Unit is Det Chf Supt Sharon Lemon. Her 29-year career started with the Metropolitan Police before she transferred to the National Crime Squad. There she held several portfolios, including head of firearms and was most recently in charge of the Paedophile On-Line Investigation Team (POLIT).

The NHTCU, whose 58 staff are a mix of civilian, police, military and customs officers, occupies the whole top floor of the skyscraper with Det Chf Supt Lemon's corner office offering outstanding views over the city of London.

It's appropriate as one of unit's key jobs is protecting businesses from the daily threats of computer criminals.

## Cost of cyber crime

A survey carried out this year by the unit found 89 per cent of firms



had been targeted at least once in the previous year by computer criminals at a cost of more than £2.5 billion.

The kind of crimes it deals with include malicious attacks by viruses, various types of fraud and denial of service attacks, where firms are blackmailed by gangs threatening to bring their networks to a halt.

In the last instance hackers use fleets of hi-jacked computers called zombies or bots, to flood a targeted network with junk emails. There are an estimated one million such computers in Britain and the advent of broad-

band has fuelled the problem.

At one point in 2004, internet service provider Pipex, was seeing as many as three to five such attacks each day, although that number has since dropped.

## Reaping bigger rewards

Det Chf Supt Lemon said: 'It is traditional crime but with new tools. You haven't got the armed robber in a post office but the impact is exactly the same. In fact it offers bigger rewards for the criminal.'

Det Chf Supt Lemon can bandy words like bots and zombies with the best of them, but it's done with a smile. She does not

share the predilection of computer experts for silly names and convoluted acronyms. But then if you had to attend a high-powered conference where the afternoon session was on 'cheese', yet another word for bots, you would have to develop a sense of humour.

While computer crime may include some hi-tech elements, often the most effective crimes are simple and aimed at finding the weak people in an organisation.

## Weak links

One gang targeted city secretaries, chatting them up and learning their computer passwords through pillow talk.

Others simply stick a £20 key-logger in the back of a machine and let it record key strokes to learn access codes.

One of the Unit's most recent successes was against a gang of software pirates who copied and distributed programmes and games. The group, which included two Ukrainians, were caught after a five-year investigation and in total received jail terms of more than seven years.

The group, who called themselves DrinkorDie, were motivated as much by the thrill of breaking corporate software, as the material rewards. Such anarchic motives are becoming the exception rather than the rule.

Det Chf Supt Lemon said: 'Four years ago it was mainly the hobbyist where as now it is serious organised crime.'

'Whatever commodity it is

they are selling they will use hi-tech crime, it is just another arm for them.

'The people who did it because they could is dropping off, and the people who are doing it for financial reward are increasing.'

'And now organised criminals are sending their second cousin twice removed through university to learn how computer systems work.'

For instance back in 2003 six British men were jailed for a complex identity theft scam which netted around £350,000. By day the men studied on computer courses and at night they enjoyed high living lifestyle funded from defrauding banks.

It's a constant battle to keep up with the ever-flourishing scams.

'I was discussing this with an internet service provider, there must be some of which we are totally unaware because it is so hi-tech,' admits Det Chf Supt Lemon.

There are clocks on the wall of the NHTCU's office giving the time in various locations around the globe – an example of the international aspect of its work.

Det Chf Supt Lemon said: 'The international co-operation is particularly exciting. People come from across the world to the NHTCU. Its reputation internationally is second to none.'

'At the moment we are working most closely with Americans and east Europeans, primarily the Russians, but it depends on the operations.'

'We have a Japanese officer coming over quite soon and we had an Australian officer over here for nine months. We've also just had some visitors from Holland and America.'

Last year the unit helped smash an extortion and money-laundering ring which targeted online bookmakers.

Arrests were made in Russia and Latvia and among the agencies involved in the investigation were the Russian equivalent of the NHTCU, Customs & Excise liaison officers in the central Asian republics and police in Australia, Canada, Estonia and America.

Det Chf Supt Lemon says that despite the impersonal nature of the crimes, what helps are the personal contacts she makes with private firms and law enforcement agencies nationally and internationally.

'Where as in traditional policing the idea that we might sit with our partners in industry or local councils was a long time coming, in this area people have cottoned on very quickly that we can't go it alone,' said Det Chf Supt Lemon.

'The NHTCU recognised early on that people do feel vulnerable about reporting to the police. We



introduced a confidentiality charter so people can give us intelligence without the fear of exposing their company or making it look as if the company was vulnerable.

'There will always be a competitive edge in industry but there is great trust. I was with an internet service provider this morning and they told me about a new initiative they have got which could be a groundbreaking but they trust me not to go and tell everyone else, and of course I won't. I repay that by trusting them as well.'

One of Det Chf Supt Lemon's first tasks is to look afresh at how efficiently these various partners are working together.

'Every meeting I chair at the moment I am looking at the terms of reference, who goes, what the outputs are and is it contemporary,' she said. 'What the Unit was trying to achieve four years ago is not what it is trying to achieve now.'

One change for the unit will be handing over of online child abuse investigations to the new Centre for Child Protection on the Internet. Attached to the Serious Organised Crime Agency, it begins work next April.

'Part of my role in this unit is to develop the ACPO hi-tech crime strategy. First of all we have got to make sure the people in force are supported by their senior management because if senior managers do not see a value in this work we are not going to see an interest.'

'Secondly, to provide them with the knowledge and tools to

be effective. Once they are in place I will be working with Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary to work up an inspection regime against which they can be assessed.'

'As a member of the public you couldn't go to all forces and expect a certain standard apart from that minimum, which is probably not enough considering where we are in terms of technology.'

If it all sounds like a lot of officers working to protect the profits of a few big firms then Det Chf Supt Lemon says computer crime affects everyone. As part of that, the unit has launched Project Endurance which will give security advice to members of the public.

'A lot of people buy computers, unwrap them and stick them in the corner like they would a television whereas they should be looking at it as a car,' she said. 'They have to service it, lock it up at night. The analogy of leaving a credit card on your dashboard at night is a good one.'

'There is a lot of info out there and if they are looking for one reliable source then with Project Endurance they can think, this is the police and this is the major ISPs and I can trust that.'

Despite her fluent, no nonsense approach, it's somehow reassuring when Det Chf Supt Lemon admits that, like many of us, when she gets home to her wireless computer network, with more firewalls than the Pentagon, she asks her children to program her mobile phone.



**Det Chf Supt Sharon Lemon battling computer criminals**